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SUBJECT: Federal Highway Administration Meets with Roads and Highways Experts in Colombia

1. Summary. Officials from the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Office of International Programs visited Bogota, Colombia on August 3rd and 4th. They met with officials from the Colombian Department of Transportation as well as experts in the field of highway safety. The trip allowed a dialogue between major players within the industry. It also laid the groundwork for a future Memorandum of Cooperation between the USG and GOC. End Summary.

2. Henry Nevares, director of the FHWA's Office of International Programs, and Michael Avery, Western Hemisphere team leader, held several meetings with key transportation officials during their two-day trip to Bogota. Juan Ricardo Noero, Viceminister of Transportation welcomed the delegation, noting that this was the first meeting of its kind since he had taken office in August of 2002.

3. During the meeting, the FHWA discussed creating a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) to create a framework to support technology transfer and information sharing e.g. facilitating technology transfer to address road safety. Noero expressed interest in beginning discussions toward an MOC, and both parties agreed to maintain an open line of communication to strengthen relations in the highway sector between both nations.

4. In discussions with academia FHWA representative, Nevares explained that universities and other learning institutions are critical to the success of the memorandum. Nevares suggested that hosting occasional conferences would offer a chance for road and highway experts to meet and exchange technology, best practices and other transportation information. Participants would convene, share their problems, and leave with collective solutions.

5. The FHWA also met with Maximiliano Gonzalez Henriquez and Guillermo Emigdio Alean Madrid, from the Ministry's National Institute of Concessions (INCO) to stress the importance of the MOC to facilitate cooperation between countries, such as in developing strong safety standards. Nevares explained that the MOC could facilitate the creation of a central technology transfer center, allowing the government and other organizations to provide standardized training at a centralized location. Henriquez and Madrid stated that since INCO's current highway data collection system is antiquated, they were especially interested in technology transfer opportunities.

6. On August 4, the FHWA hosted a lunch to bring together the major players in Colombia's land transportation industry. Attendees included city and nationwide transportation officials, transportation experts from major universities, as well as representatives from the trucking industry and Colombia's truckers' union. Many of the participants noted that they rarely have the opportunity to meet as a group. Director Nevares extended an invitation to the group to continue the bilateral dialogue.

7. The FHWA also met with Mauricio Ramirez, Director of the National Highways Institute (Invias). Ramirez also supported the idea of an MOC and shared information about road safety/security issues. Ramirez told the delegation that the number of attacks against road infrastructure in Colombia dropped from 37 incidents in 2004 to just 2, as of the first week of August 2005. The improvement, according to Ramirez, is due to Invias' efforts to use some toll road receipts to finance Special Forces (army and police) to increase road protection, monitoring and rapid response capability.

8. To further bolster highway security, Ramirez noted that Invias created special monitoring units consisting of motorcycles, cars, and trucks equipped with GPS devices to patrol the country's roads. Additionally, communities have formed communication networks to improve road safety efforts. As a result, road traffic has increased 24 percent per year during the administration of President Uribe.

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